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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

IN DEFENSE OF LINCOLN

SIR,—

That genial philosopher, Josh Billings, once said that it is "better not to know so many things than to know so many things that ain't not so."

One is reminded of this bit of wisdom on reading John Jay Chapman's paper on "Lincoln and Hamlet" in the *MARCH REVIEW*. According to Mr. Chapman, Lincoln lived in a most "benighted age," and while "he threw into political life as much as that life could carry of liberal thought," he was not profound, and was unable to see the deeper issues behind the politics of his time. Instead of being a clear-eyed, prophetic minded statesman, he was a mere builder of a political machine, and even as a politician he was only able to "see a political idea when it was above the political horizon—or was just nearly about to rise"; "he was caged and controlled by the conviction that there must be a United States"; an honest, painstaking plodder, he reminds the author of a "very knowing mountain mule"; "caged in his problems of tangible politics, he was obtuse to the meaning of John Brown's Raid." He "never understood the slavery question." "He was always bent on preserving the Union, with or without slavery," because the Constitution accorded slavery certain rights, but "the notion of preserving slavery because it was provided for in the Constitution of the United States was the thought of illiterate men." Lincoln never saw "the problem in the larger light"; never saw "that slavery was doomed"; and employed "his enormous mental powers in bolstering up a thesis that was essentially false." His brain was so cramped by the poison of slavery, that "he could not see that the Constitution of the United States was a fetish and that he himself was like a superstitious woman who was clinging to a rag doll during a tempest at sea." He "had moments of illumination," but "his habits of self-suppression and his belief in his doctrine besieged him, and the light would flicker and go out." Mr. Chapman deplors the fact that "Lincoln's timidity has had an evil influence upon American character from his day to our own"; that it has been a deterrent force operating against every "American reform movement"; and he even gravely informs us that "it is quite certain that the precedent of 1860 had a powerful influence in preventing our administration from preparing for war in 1914." From which it would seem that Mr. Lincoln is in some way held accountable for the timidity and inefficiency of his predecessor, James Buchanan, who was President in 1860, and it doubtless led to the re-

election of Mr. Wilson in 1916, because *his* timidity had "kept us out of war." As an evidence of Mr. Lincoln's "inability to see the deeper issues behind the politics of his time," Mr. Chapman misstates his position concerning a Constitutional amendment referred to in the First Inaugural, which Mr. Lincoln had never seen, and as a conclusive evidence of his inefficiency as an executive he quotes the closing lines of the First Inaugural, which he characterizes as "flat" if intended as a call to patriotism, as "ludicrous" if intended as a threat, and as "tending to incite any manly revolutionist to unusual activity."

Hamlet is an inconspicuous figure in this indictment. He simply serves as a screen upon which Mr. Chapman would have us see pictures of a man who, as he patronizingly concedes, might have been great—a man of "enormous mental powers," a man of such "gigantic natural powers" that he could single-handed and alone "have brought the brains of Europe to our rescue," and with Europe's brains (*and war?*) would have settled the slavery question in short order; but who, instead, wasted his powers and sunk to the level of a mere "John A-Dreams," without ability to comprehend the great issues of his day. Just what use Mr. Lincoln could have made of Europe's brains in this summary suppression of rebellion and extinction of slavery, Mr. Chapman does not explain.

I do not write this in defense of Lincoln. He needs none. But, as one of the illiterates who lived in that "benighted age," and had the honor to serve as a member of his Body Guard or mounted escort from 1863 until his assassination, and bore a very humble part in that struggle for national life, I write only to give some faint expression to my indignation. To one who lived through the period of the Civil War, and was also in touch with the events of the ten years which preceded it, Mr. Chapman's superficial interpretation, or misinterpretation, of Mr. Lincoln's character and of his course as President, is unpleasant reading.

It is in a way curious, as well as exasperating, in this day and in the light of events, when the whole world knows that our great Republic was saved from destruction by the wisdom of Mr. Lincoln and the valor of its loyal sons who answered his call, to see this recrudescence of discredited ideas of ante bellum days. *Who's Who* tells us that Mr. Chapman was born in 1862. His information concerning the events of that "illiterate" and "benighted" time is necessarily second-hand. Where did he get it, and upon what intellectual provender has he fed, to give rise to this product of mental dyspepsia? In what school was he taught, that the Constitution of the United States is to him a mere "fetish" for which a superstitious woman's rag doll is a fitting simile? He tells us that his paper was inspired by "reading all one day about Lincoln, and going to see Hamlet on the next." It is a fairly good guess that his day's reading must have been devoted to the products of those zealous, brilliant and honest, but intemperate and impractical reformers of that day, who had adopted as their motto—"The Constitution of the United States is a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell"; who, in 1845, had seriously proposed that Massachusetts should secede from the Union because of slavery, and whose statesmanship suggests the physician who, when called to treat a sick man, instead of trying to save the patient would

advise putting him to death, because some of his children had the seven-year itch.

It is true that Mr. Lincoln was a politician,—but a politician in the highest and best sense of that term. He was also a statesman, in the highest and best sense of *that* term. When he succeeded to the Presidency, while several of the States had attempted to secede, from his point of view (which was the only logical point of view) they could not secede. By the adoption of the Constitution, a nation had been created—the States had been merged into an indissoluble Union, and the Constitution was that which bound them together. Therefore, while the Constitution stood unchanged, the attempted secession was ineffectual. Those States were not out of the Union, they were still integral parts of it, but were in a state of insurrection. The only logical course was to stand by the Constitution and maintain the Union thus created. It is well for the world that Mr. Lincoln held to his conviction that there must be a United States—well for the world was his determination that the Union should be preserved even if in saving it slavery survived for a time—well for the world that Mr. Lincoln was wise enough to see that the Constitution was the one and only thing which held the States bound in an indivisible unity, and that instead of being a mere fetish it was rather the stanch bulkhead that saved the ship of state from sinking when it was torpedoed by a slaveholders' insurrection. Mr. Lincoln was called to serve the nation at a time when it was suffering from grave internal disorder. As the humane physician knows that the ethics of his profession make it his duty to save the life and restore the health of his patient if possible, so Mr. Lincoln knew that his oath of office bound him to save the Union which made us a nation, if that were possible. The 1,866,000 who had voted for him for President, had by that act declared their opposition to the extension of slavery into the territories, as that was the issue upon which he was elected; but 1,375,000 other voters who had voted for Mr. Douglas, had thereby declared their indifference as to that issue, and were willing that slavery should be thus extended; while 845,000 who voted for Mr. Breckinridge had declared with equal emphasis in favor of giving the slaveholders everything they asked for. Only 589,000 who voted for Mr. Bell, had indicated their wish to see slavery abolished. The nation was hopelessly divided on the slavery question. If the nation was to be saved, it was necessary to find a common ground upon which its friends could stand, and a rallying cry to which enough would respond to defeat the insurrection. That rallying cry was Union, and that common ground was its maintenance. Thousands, even of those who had voted for Mr. Breckinridge, stood firmly for the maintenance of the Union, and the closing lines of that First Inaugural made the most subtle and effective appeal to tens of thousands who would have been deaf to an appeal to take up arms for the abolition of slavery.

Mr. Lincoln's stand, without doubt, held the border States. Premature action for the abolition of slavery would have caused them to join the secession movement, and as Mr. Lincoln suggested to a delegation from Chicago in 1862, there were fifty thousand bayonets from those States in our armies, which would be turned against us by acting too soon. In addition, such action would have greatly augmented the ranks of the Knights of the Golden Circle, the Sons of Liberty, and

other disloyal organizations in Indiana, Ohio and Illinois, and thus have caused serious embarrassment, and would have rendered the outcome uncertain.

Mr. Lincoln was as much opposed to slavery as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, or Horace Greeley. He believed in its eventual extirpation, and his method of dealing with it was the clear-headed method of a statesman, who could see beyond the immediate present and visualize something of the great and entirely free nation that was to be. He believed in government of the people and by the people. The end of slavery must come through action by the people, changing the fundamental law. With slavery excluded from the territories, and with those territories growing up into free States, the time was not far distant when the people who were opposed to it would be strong enough to end it by the methods prescribed by the Constitution. That end could be accomplished only by saving the Union. Hence, whether the Union was saved either with or without slavery, was secondary. In fact, it *was* saved *with* slavery, for the emancipation proclamation being solely a war measure, was effectual only in the revolting States, and was by its terms expressly thus limited. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution only became effective as a part of that instrument with the Proclamation of December 18, 1865,—after the war was ended.

Mr. Lincoln's so-called timidity was only that calm, clear-headed deliberation which prevents premature and ill-considered action; that saving grace of combined coolness and common sense, that enabled him to steer safely between the Scylla of extreme pro-slaveryism and the Charybdis of extreme abolitionism; that saving grace which has on still other occasions preserved us from grave and disastrous blunders,—such as, the repudiation of our national debt,—the twin crazes of greenbackism and free silverism, and has thus far stayed the hands of those who in the name of reform through the overruling or recall of judicial decisions by popular vote, would have destroyed the one thing which distinguishes our Government from all others and makes it indeed a government for all the people, in the protection it affords to the individual and to the minority, as against an intolerant and passion-ruled majority. That so-called timidity furnishes no precedent for the pusillanimity which denied and still denies to our citizens protection from and reparation for Mexican outrages, and which held the manhood of our country in leash for two years while German barbarism insolently raged in its ghastly riot.

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INVESTING IN THE PHILIPPINES

SIR,—One thing which the members of the Philippine Mission now visiting America are not saying much about, but which is very near their hearts and perhaps the paramount reason for their visit, is the Philippine Land Title Act.

This is a measure recently passed by the Philippine Legislature, but which President Wilson has not approved. The President deeply disappointed the Filipinos and sacrificed much of the halo of high